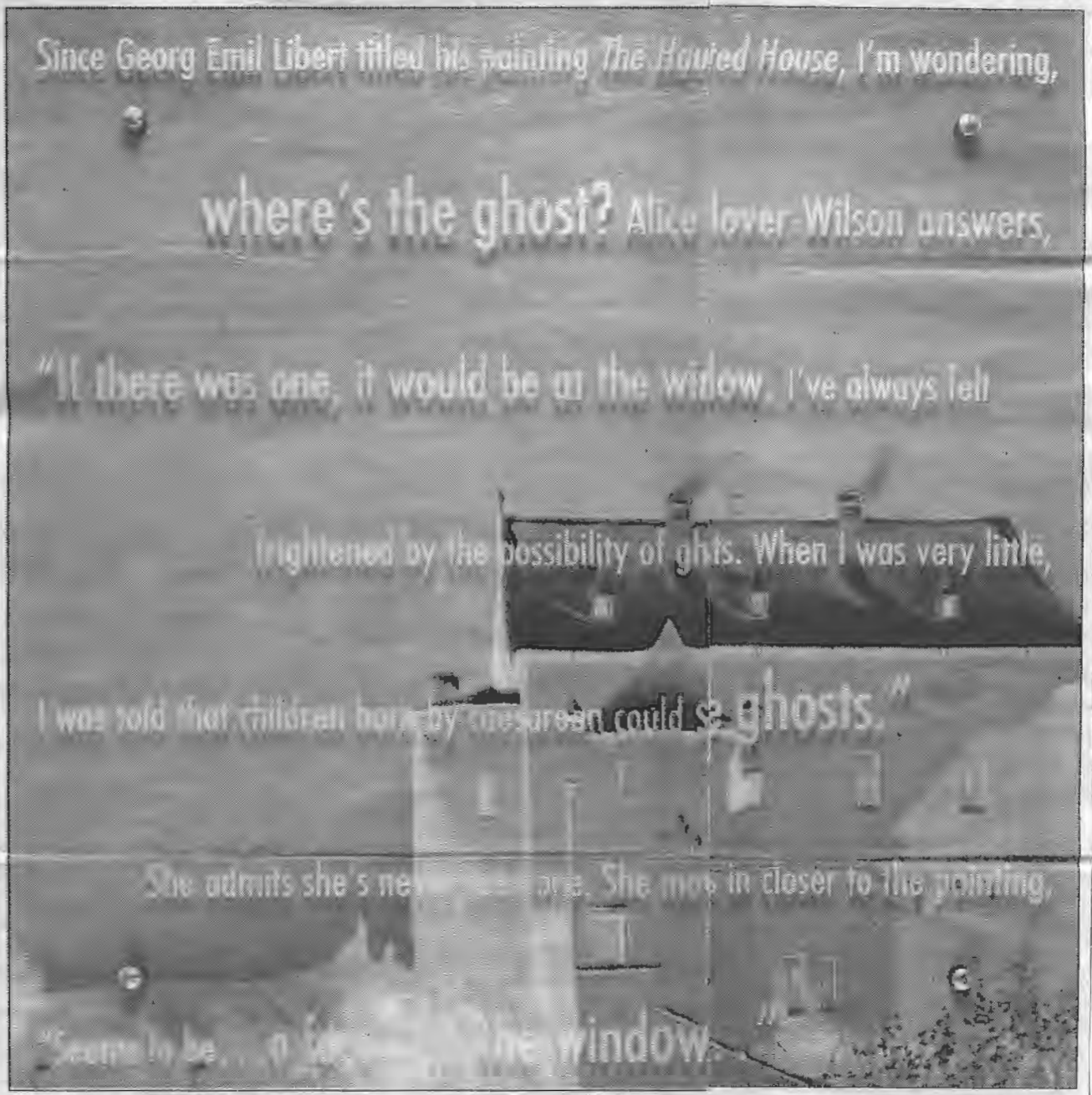
Arts

Power to the people

Why would an artist want a bunch of gardeners, redheads and Spanish immigrants to help him create his works? **Stuart Jeffries** finds out



In a word . . . Aptekar's If There Was One, made with the help of a focus group

PHOTOGRAPH: JEAN LUC CORMIER

Why should artists have the last word about their work? What the spectator sees in a painting, and what they say about it, can be just as engaging. Sometimes more so.

"Often when people come into a museum they feel restricted rather than encouraged," says the American painter Ken Aptekar. "I am trying to show that I recognise that and want to change it." What Aptekar has done, in a project called Q&A, is take works of art from the Victoria and Albert Museum's European collection – "I chose everything from the most anonymous, dusty crap languishing in the vaults to the great masterpieces" – and show them to a series of focus groups. The responses were videotaped and transcribed, with the most interesting quotations sandblasted on to sheets of glass. Then he painted copies of details from the pictnres discussed and attached the glass sheets to them. The result – to be shown at the V&A – is a series of artworks that amounts to a collaboration between Aptekar, the focns group, and perhaps even the original artists themselves, in which the spectators get to talk back to the paintings.

"I had all sorts of preconceptions about the English, and Londoners in particular, and that was reflected in my choice of focus groups. I really wanted to get a group of London cabbies to spend a couple of hours in the gallery, giving me their responses. But we just couldn't get them to take the time off work. And I was really keen to get a group of gardeners to spend an afternoon with me looking at landscape paintings. In the end, we put together a focus group of gardeners with learning disabilities, which was fascinating and exasperating. One guy took about 12 minutes to give me his response to a painting, with 10 to 15 seconds between each word. But I really respected the importance he attached to getting his response over to me."

Other focus groups included redheads ("I'm a redhead myself, so I really wanted their responses"), Afro-Caribbean women ("I wanted people outside the European art tradition and museum culture"), art students ("And those who often aren't"), and middle-aged Spanish immigrants ("I wanted people whose first language wasn't English. And what I found was that, although their spoken English may not have been grammatically perfect, it was immensely expressive and more engaging as a result"). "Generally, I wanted to reflect the diversity of Londoners."

But the unexpected responses, which themselves subvert some of Aptekar's pat nntions about London and Londoners, give the exhibition its vitality. One woman was shown a picture of a supposedly haunted house, and told Aptekar she had a ghost in her own home. Each night for 10 years she lit a candle to placate it. She told Aptekar that one morning the ghost came up behind her and said it didn't like tea, to which the woman replied: "It's my house now." Aptekar used this story, sandblasted the quotations and superimposed them, not on the picture of the house, but over a still-life canvas of a tea service, illuminated by several candles.

Aptekar's exhibition consists of four galleries, each with a purportedly British theme. Thus, one is called A Landscape Short on Land and consists of paintings of landscapes in which sea and sky domiuate. Another is called Man's Best Friend (dog paintings); another, Who's Who, consists of portraits and figures. The final gallery is called The Thing About Tea

and includes genre scenes and still lives of tea services.

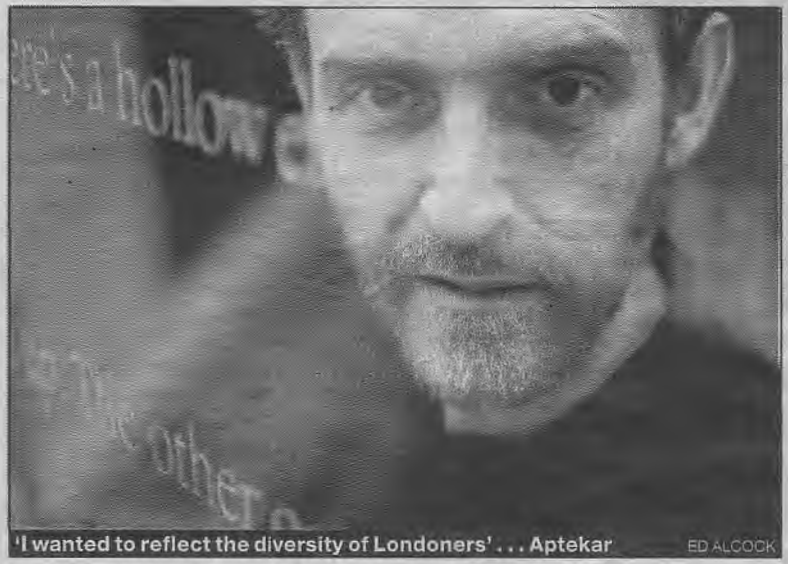
Aptekar produced a similar exhibition called Talking to Pictures at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC a couple of years ago, which drew the attention of the Harvard professor of art history, Norman Bryson. He put Aptekar's work in the context of the death-of-the-author thesis extolled by the likes of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Bryson said there had been a shift from the production of art to its reception, from the death of the author to the birth of the reader/viewer. Or, at least, we thought there had been.

"We say that such a shift took place," wrote Bryson in his analysis of the exhibition for the magazine Art in America, "but doing so may prevent us from seeing how little of the radical potential of the death-of-the-author idea has, in fact, been historically realised. If the turn from makers to receivers had truly been allowed to develop, surely by now we would have had a generation of studies analysing how viewers actually go about their business."

But because these investigations have not happened and because the artist's mystique remains intact, Aptekar's exhibitions at the Corcoran and now the V&A are explosive affairs. They roll a grenade into museums, in which, too often, only responses acknowledged as appropriate by the institution are regarded as worthwhile.

There has always been another story of art – the spectators' personal, sometimes perverse, responses. Aptekar's projects call on spectators to respond to works of art idiosyncratically, rather than encouraging them to check in their subjective perspectives and tastes before entering the gallery. In so doing, Aptekar hopes to change the balance of power between artist and spectator.

But why should Aptekar have the last word on that? What his V&A exhibition cries out for is for visitors to talk back to his paintings, to have their own idiosyncratic responses to his artistic project. And then to mount an exhibition of their own, which would be talked back to by other visitors, and then another... It could go on for ever.



'I wanted to reflect the diversity of Londoners'... Aptekar ED ALCOCK

Q&A is part of the Give & Take exhibition, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London SW7 (0870 442 0808), from January 30 until April 1.